

<b>Classification:</b> Open	<b>Decision Type:</b> Key
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<b>Report to:</b>	Cabinet	<b>Date:</b> 11 March 2026
<b>Subject:</b>	Step Forward Foster Carers	
<b>Report of</b>	Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children and Young People	

## Summary

We are seeking approval to recruitment a specialist foster carer group of Step Forward Carers who can care for children with more complex needs. The cohort of children who would be cared for by Step Forward carers are those who would be otherwise cared for in residential care or likely to need a residential care placement.

As of January 2026, Bury has 367 children in care. This is slightly above the average when compared with statistical comparator authorities. Of these, 249 children (68%) are placed in foster care arrangements, including kinship carers. A further 50 children (13.6%) reside in children’s homes, and 30 (8.1%) are accommodated in supported living arrangements. The remaining children are primarily placed with parents or have been matched for adoption.

Children are supported to live in foster care when they cannot be cared for within their own families or family and friend network. Residential Children’s Home placements are only considered when foster care options are unavailable or unsuitable, or for children presenting with complex emotional, behavioural, or mental health needs which cannot be matched with foster carers skills. The age range of children in residential care is between 7 and 17 years.

Step Forward Foster Carers will be required to have specific qualifications and experience:

- Have experience of working with children and young people in a professional capacity i.e., Youth Workers, Social Workers, Teachers, Allied Health Professionals, Emergency Services personnel, Therapeutic practitioners etc.
- Experience of working with children and young people with complex needs.
- Understanding of how trauma, attachment, and neglect affect children and adolescents.
- Understanding of child development and effects of life experience.

The Specialist Step Forward Foster Carer Scheme (“Scheme”) will offer solo placements and enable children and young people to step down from residential care and move to a family environment which can meet their needs. This initiative offers those skilled and selected carers enhanced support and payments, helping them build confidence and capacity whilst reducing the local authority’s reliance and high spend on residential placements.

Our current spend on residential placements for our children and young people is projected to be £18.5m for 2025/26 financial year.

In the early stages we would plan to recruit six Step Forward foster carer households to support 6 children who are currently in residential settings or with a plan of residential care. The total cost including a dedicated assessing and supervising social worker would be **£369,324** for the 12-month pilot period.

Recruiting Step Forward Foster Carers (self-employed as per the existing Mainstream Foster carers) and paying them an annual fee of £53,554 per year (£1029.90 per week) will incur a cost of £321,324 for x 6 fostering households. This includes the normal maintenance allowance and professional fee every other foster carer receives, plus additional allowances for this specialist carer category. This recognises additional skills of a Step Forward Carer, a 'Hard to Place' element currently within our current funding structure and a solo fee for the young person to be the carers only child.

This needs to be considered alongside the average per child per week residential placement cost of approximately £7,418 per week; the forecasted minimum cost savings per Step Forward fostering household over a three-year period would be **£626,115** (this has not factored in further year on year inflation uplifts). For 6 children to step down to a Step Forward fostering household, over 3 years the savings would be £3.757 million.

*Additionally* Step Forward Foster carers will receive:

- 50% council tax exemption (£6690 per annum for 6 households)
- Children in Care will continue to receive birthday/Christmas/holiday allowances as per Fostering Allowance Guide. This should not be seen as an allowance for the carer. (£5991 per annum for 6 children/young people)
- There will be in place wrap around support from internal/external sources i.e. dedicated SSW, Family Support worker, access to an in-house psychologist via our emotional health and well-being team being recruited to, Foster Carer mentoring and training.

## **Recommendation(s)**

Cabinet

1. Approves a twelve-month pilot of the Step Forward Foster Carers Scheme, at a total cost to the Council of £369,324 for the term of the pilot.
2. Notes that the estimated time for mobilisation of the Scheme is 6-9 months from decision to fund (this allows time for safe recruitment, assessment, approval, training, matching and placing).

## **Reasons for recommendation(s)**

The Scheme offers a strategic, cost-effective way to grow a specialist fostering model and reduce reliance on residential care for our children. It supports better outcomes for children by ensuring they can become part of a stable fostering family environment,

reduces the current high spend on residential care and aligns with national priorities for children's social care reform.

The Scheme will also focus on improving health, promoting wellbeing, and fostering independence through specialist foster care by:

- Training foster carers to support children with specific health or emotional needs, such as those with disabilities, trauma, or complex medical conditions.
- Providing therapeutic support to help children develop resilience and emotional stability, whilst having a greater understanding of their journey.
- Encouraging independence by equipping young people with life skills, confidence, and support networks to transition successfully into adulthood.
- Collaborating with healthcare professionals to ensure the best possible physical and mental health outcomes for our children.

### **Alternative options considered and rejected**

#### **Option 1: Do Nothing / Rely on short-long term impact of the Sufficiency Strategy, Foster Carer Recruitment and Marketing Strategy and development of GM Fostering Hub.**

We could rely solely on the medium to long term sufficiency plan, further embedding and development of the Greater Manchester Fostering Hub; our internal Recruitment and Marketing Strategy, alongside our continued incentives already in place including;

- Continued weekly scrutiny, tracking and monitoring of placement and support package requests via Residential Panel.
- Close scrutiny of foster placements showing signs of disruption and implementation of early intervention strategies to reduce risk of break down.
- Development and design of an internal residential estate between now and 2028.
- Edge of Care services diverting children and young people from entering care.
- Continued reviews of those young people appropriate for step down into supported accommodations (age 16+) and successful registration of our Supported Lodgings providers

There is no doubt cost savings will be achieved via our current initiatives. However, doing nothing at this stage is not an option. The Scheme will complement the above initiatives already in progress and provide the Local Authority with more ways to improve the lives of children in care whilst significantly reducing current forecasted overspend on placements. This option builds on the already agreed cost-saving initiatives and strengthens the Local Authorities range of options available to them when placing children with complex needs in care settings. Often these decisions are made in times of crisis and when 'placement choices' are either nil or limited due to national sufficiency challenges.

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## **Background**

### **1. Current Challenges:**

In Bury we have children and young people who are currently living in residential children's homes who would be best placed in a family environment with foster carers. This new scheme will focus on recruiting Step Forward foster carers for these specific children and young people. The children and young people needing a foster family are aged from 7 to 15 years at the time of writing this report.

We know that most children and young people benefit more from living in a family environment as opposed to a residential home. We also know that caring for children who have transitioned from residential homes to foster care can bring challenges, therefore we have included in our offer an enhanced support package to help foster carers care for these children and young people

High costs and limited availability of Independent Fostering Agency ("IFA") placements and residential placements alongside low in house foster care sufficiency and difficulty recruiting and retaining foster carers (not just in Bury but England wide) means we are facing significant challenges when trying to identify homes for our children and young people whom cannot live with their own families.

Despite fostering recruitment preparation and training, many new foster carers feel unprepared for high-complexity placements. Equally new carers are reluctant to take children stepping down from residential care because they carry misconceptions about why the children are in residential homes. This impacts upon their confidence and ability to confidently provide care for these children, often leading to Children's services managing:

- An increased use of expensive residential placements
- Placement breakdowns and poor outcomes for our children
- Inefficient use of recruitment resources

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## 2. Opportunity:

Many potential carers are willing but hesitant due to commit full time to fostering due; to the risk of financial instability; the intensity of full-time fostering without the right support; and misconceptions about what fostering older children can entail.

A targeted recruitment campaign for specialist step down foster carers will provide specialist foster carers with structured support, training and financial incentives to ease new carers into the role and move children from Residential homes into foster families.

### Support Package

Dedicated supervising social worker

Weekly reflective supervision

Access to trauma-informed training

Peer mentoring from experienced carers

6 weekly consultations with our internal emotional health and well-being service once established

Family Support Worker

### Financial Analysis and Pilot

We are proposing a weekly carer payment of £1029.90 per week from the point of placement. This is calculated as a double current professional fee and double current maintenance fee we would pay for an 11 - 15-year-old, plus £100 'hard to place' fee.

A retention incentive of £1000 after 12 months active fostering that young person.

### Pilot Model (6 Step Forward households, 12 months, 1 child each)

Cost of Specialist Foster Carer payments for x6 Specialist Family First' Foster Carer households:

£1029.90 per week for one household x 52 weeks = £53,554.80

£1029.90 per week x6 households = £6179.40per week x 52 weeks = £321,324

Support services: x1 additional Supervising Social Worker for this scheme = **£42,000**

£1000 x 6 end of 12m incentive fee = £6,000

Total pilot cost: **£369,324**

## 3. Potential savings if 6 children step down from residential into foster care:

Residential care costs average at approximately £7,418 per week per child with the highest placement cost being £18,892 per week, creating unsustainable financial pressure. However, the children likely to step down to foster care are not in the highest cost placements, so if we assume an average weekly cost for their current residential

placement of £6,000 per week, this would give a potential full year saving for each child of £312,000, x 6 children = **£1.872 million**.

Allowing for the gradual step down of children through the year, the savings in the first year would be half the projected annual amount minus half the cost of the follow-on placements: **£751,338**. Savings in year 2 (full year savings), compared to the cost of their current residential placements would be **£1.503m**. Over a three-year period, the projected savings, compared to the same children remaining in residential care would be £3.75m

#### 4. Implementation timelines

Phase	Activity	Timeline
<b>Pre Mobilisation phase</b>	Pilot design framework	<b>1 month</b>
	Roll out the recruitment campaign	<b>3 - 4 months</b>
<b>Phase 1</b>	Application, onboarding, assessment and approval	<b>Months 1- 5</b>
<b>Phase 2</b>	Begin pre matching and support planning	<b>Month 3 - 4</b>
<b>Phase 3</b>	Matching meetings and placement planning/ commencement ( <i>immediately following FC panel approval</i> )	<b>Month 5 - 6</b>
<b>Phase 4</b>	Midway Review at 3 months of placement and support	<b>Month 9 - 10</b>
<b>Phase 6</b>	Evaluate outcomes	<b>Month 12</b>
<b>Phase 7</b>	Seek approval to scale up by at least x 6 more households	<b>Year 2</b>

#### 5. Placement Strategy

Professionals pre matching discussions via children and carers profiles whilst carers are progressing through assessment
Preparation work completed with both the child and the foster carers separately. Information sharing, trauma and attachment training g, consultation with Psychologist, identify support needs and action plan - all to ensure suitability and readiness on both sides
Match presented too and agreed by Senior Manager in matching meeting. Specialist SSW and Child's allocated SW commence with pre-placement planning for introductions. Develop full transition plan. Formulate baseline goals and outcomes
Placement day and wrap around 12-week support. Child Looked after Review takes place within the first 28 days.
Midway review of placement at 3-month point - quarterly placement reviews thereafter until 12 month point where all goals and outcomes will be evaluated.

## **6. Outcomes and Impact**

### **For Children:**

More stable, nurturing environments  
Reduced time in residential care  
Improved emotional wellbeing and stability  
Greater sense of belonging and continuity  
Better educational and health outcomes

### **For Carers:**

Clear pathway into fostering  
Increased confidence and retention  
Clear pathway to long-term fostering  
Stronger relationships with support networks  
Same SW assessing and supporting post approval.  
Enhanced payment structure allowing them to feel financially stable

### **For Children's Service's**

Improved placement stability and outcomes  
Reduced residential spend and cost savings overall  
Improved sufficiency and placement stability  
Enhanced reputation and Ofsted outcomes

### **Evaluation Metrics**

- Number of carers retained after 12 months
- Number of children stepped down from residential
- Placement stability rates
- Cost savings achieved
- Carer feedback evaluation of scheme

### **Conclusion**

This Step Forward fostering model offers a strategic, cost-effective way to grow the fostering workforce and reduce reliance on costly residential care placements. It supports better outcomes for children, reduces the current high spend on residential care, and aligns with national priorities for children's social care reform.

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### **Links with the Corporate Priorities:**

Developing in-house fostering increases local placement sufficiency, reduces disruption and enables children to remain closer to their families, schools and communities. This improves stability, educational attainment, emotional well-being and long-term positive outcomes.

This proposal supports the Let's do it strategy principles in the following way:

**Prevention and early intervention** - in-house fostering supports earlier permanence planning, reduces placement breakdown, and allows resources to shift from crisis spend to preventative family support.

**Strengths-based practice** - Local foster carers are community assets. Expanding in-house fostering reflects a commitment to “doing with” families and communities rather than relying on external markets.

**Locality and place-based working** - children remaining within their home borough Bury maintain important relationships and access to local services, strengthening place-based delivery.

**Collaboration and System Leadership** - developing increased in-house fostering capacity demonstrates proactive system leadership and strengthens local authority sufficiency and reducing dependency on expensive residential placements.

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### **Equality Impact and Considerations:**

A full EIA has been completed for this activity. The analysis has identified impacts for several characteristics and circumstances which the activity seeks to address. As such all overall impacts are neutral or positive with no outstanding equalities concerns at this stage.

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### **Environmental Impact and Considerations:**

There are minimal adverse environmental impacts of the proposal to develop an in-house Step Forward foster carers locally. Children being supported to live in the Bury community will reduce the need to travel out of area for families, carers, Social Workers and other professionals.

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### **Assessment and Mitigation of Risk:**

<b>Risk / opportunity</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>
Carers not progressing	Low	Regular reviews and tailored support
Budget constraints	Low	Pilot program with limited cohort
Placement breakdowns	Medium	Enhanced matching and wraparound support
Recruitment shortfall	Medium	Targeted campaigns, incentives
Budget overspend	Low	Pilot phase, phased rollout

We have also considered the recent national announcements regarding the Department for Education’s (DfE) ambition to increase the number of new foster carers across England. As part of this ambition, the DfE is exploring a more regionalised approach to fostering recruitment, assessment, and approval, including consideration of an end- to- end role for regional hubs. Bury are working with colleagues across Greater Manchester to consider these requirements and following consultation on this

proposal with key professionals involved the view is that there is no impact of these changes as the expansion of the Greater Manchester Fostering hub regional hub is in the very early stages of development.

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### **Legal Implications:**

Local Authorities have a general duty under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area who are in need.

Accommodation may be provided under section 17, but if the circumstances trigger a duty under section 20, the authority must treat the accommodation as section 20 accommodation and the children becomes “looked after”.

In addition, it is the statutory duty of every Local Authority looking after a child to safeguard and promote their welfare including the child’s educational achievement and to provide the child with accommodation and maintenance (Sections 22A and B Children Act 1989). If a child cannot live with their parent or family members, a Local Authority must place a child in ‘the most appropriate placement available’ (Section 22C(5) Children Act 1989).

The Local Authority must ensure the placement is such that it allows the child to live near their home, it does not disrupt the child’s education or training and allows the child to be placed within their area (Section 22C(8) - (9)). Whilst Section 22G of the Children Act, imposes a duty upon an authority to ensure that they have sufficient accommodation available to meet the needs of the children they are looking after, as well as children in need who are at risk of care or custody. This sufficiency duty extends to ensuring access to specialist and appropriate placements, particularly for children with complex or multiple needs.

The Statutory Guidance ‘The Children Act 1989: Guidance and Regulations: Volume 4: Fostering Services’ and ‘Applying Corporate Parenting Principles to looked after children and care leavers’ and corporate parenting principles set out in the Children and Social Work Act 2017, Section 1 make it clear that Local Authorities must act in the best interests of children in care in their area promoting their emotional and physical wellbeing.

The proposals made align closely with these statutory duties on Bury Council, and an example of the implementation of these principles moving towards specialist foster care, and adherence to the duties outlined above

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### **Financial Implications:**

The proposal to recruit 6 specialist foster carers is anticipated to be self-financing and essentially an invest-to-save proposal with the increase in staffing costs of the 6 specialist foster carers being offset from savings generated through reducing the residential care costs.

Item	Estimated Cost	Notes
Fixed Payments	£1,029.90 pw per carer	From the point of placement
Support Services	£59,718 per annum, for x1 SSW	Includes training and support
Incentive payment after 12m	£1,000 per Foster Carer	£6,000 for 6 foster carers
Savings from reduced residential use for six children	<b>£1.933 million</b>	Based on average cost full year differential

**Appendices:**

None.

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**Background papers:**

Let's do it Strategy 2030

**Policy paper: Renewing fostering: homes for 10,000 more children** [Renewing fostering: homes for 10,000 more children - GOV.UK](#)

**Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.**

Term	Meaning